

We finally came back from India... This trip was long planned since April 2019 when it was canceled because of Covid-19. We could recover the plane tickets and all the private portion of the trip but thanks to the Indian government, we lost all the private safaris and entrance fees booked for all the parks. This trip was then postponed twice until this year when we took the risk to do it beginning of April 2022. Luckily, India reopened commercial flights from western countries on March 27, which allowed us to finally visit India in search of Bengal Tigers. We choose April during the hot season to maximize photo opportunities of Tigers, which proved to be a good decision for this aspect but led to some other drawbacks as I will explain later.

We booked this trip with Martin from Royle Safaris. The organization was great and I thank Martin for all the support he gave us to limit our loss when the trip was initially cancelled. It was a 2 week-long trip that we divided into one week in Gujarat to visit Gir Forest for Asiatic lions, Velavadar for Blackbuck, Jungle cat and strip hyena, and Little Rann of Kutch for Asiatic wild ass and foxes. After Gujarat, we spent the second week in Tadoba for tigers. Martin and a friend of mine both suggested this park to combine our chance to see tigers with some other iconic species like dhole or sloth bears. I concur this was a great suggestion.

After a long but uneventful inbound trip from Marseille through Frankfurt and Doha with Qatar Airways, we arrived in India at the Ahmedabad airport. As usual during this Covid days, we had to fill numerous documents required by the airline companies and the Indian government but very few were actually checked. Upon arrival, it was also officially documented that 2% of the international flight passengers to India would be randomly selected for Covid PCR testing at our own expense but nothing was done. I won't complain on this one ☺. The other good news is that to promote and resume foreign tourism, the India government issued all visas applied in March 2022 free of charge. Good idea! After collecting our luggage and some cash, we were greeted at the airport by the driver and naturalist guide who would be with us for the entire Gujarat section of our trip and we directly drove to Gir Forest.

As I mentioned earlier, we chose April for Tigers. We knew it would be hot but it was actually insanely hot with temperatures ranging between 40 to 46°C every day! It looks like temperature even went up to 50°C shortly after we came back to France. Such high temperatures were definitely good for tigers who like to bath in water to freshen up but on the other hand, they were not good for mammal watching overall and I think we missed many species in Gujarat because of that, unless it was only due to bad luck. Surprisingly, we saw many birds even with such high temperatures but of course we were too late in April to see all the migrant birds that stop over year and make Gujarat a world known place for birders.

Our first stop was in **Gir Forest** with the prime target to see the Asiatic lions. We stayed at the Gir Birding lodge, a very nice hotel surrounded by mango trees, not luxurious but comfortable and clean enough, with a good restaurant and the owners were very friendly. In addition, and as the name suggested, there were several water sources attracting many birds during the hottest part of the day, which was good to spend time between the morning and afternoon safaris. They even installed a hide but it was not very productive. The lodge was almost empty with only a couple of other Indian guests and we were the only western people. We were actually the only white people in Gir Forest according to our guide and we indeed only saw a German guy once during all the safaris we did there. Another bonus with this lodge is that it was right next to the Gir Forest entrance gates.

I was pleasantly surprised by the Gir Forest: the park is not only very scenic, clean and full of wildlife but also pretty well managed. Getting the permits and drivers/rangers at the gate was pretty well organized. We had some minor issues with paper work and extra fees we supposedly had to pay but this could be sorted out with the help of Martin. Talking about fees, we knew we had to pay camera fees and they are expensive in Gir: 1400 INR per camera per day. This is now the same price whether you have small or large cameras. Such fees are for foreign tourists and compared to what Indians pay, they are absurdly high. I will come again to that later. We booked 5 safaris and I think this is enough to get a good grasp of the park and enough photo opportunities with lions. The safari in Gir basically last 3 hours: from 6 to 9am in the morning and then, 4 to 7pm in the afternoon. For each safari, you are assigned a car/driver, a park ranger and a road inside the park. There are 12 different roads and you have to strictly follow the assigned road during the entire safari. If lions are seen in a different road, you are screwed. Better to know this in advance. We booked private safaris for all the parks we visited and although this is adding a significant cost, we did not regret this choice because sharing vehicle with other people who don't have the same expectations as you can be very problematic when you want to focus on taking nice photos. Being alone, we could ask the driver/ranger to focus on whatever species we wanted and stay as long as we'd like with animals, with the notable exception of lions. Indeed, when lions are seen, most of the other cars are around and the time each car can spend with the lions is somewhat limited and regulated by rangers.

In terms of wildlife, Gir Forest was very rich of both mammals and birds. The number of **chitals** was amazing and **wild boars** or other **ungulates** also frequently seen. **Asiatic lions** were fairly easy to see and we scored them in every safari we did there. We also observed **grey** and **ruddy mungoses**, **langurs**, and two **golden jackals**. On the other hand, we missed **leopard** and **Indian porcupine**. All in all, I was very pleased with Gir Forest and I would certainly recommend friends to spend some time there.

After Gir Forest, we drove to **Velavadar** where we stayed at the Blackbuck Lodge. This place is astonishing: very surprising to find such a luxurious lodge in the middle of nowhere. All the chalets are huge and very comfortable, some even have their private pool! and the restaurant is very cozy serving refined cuisine. We stayed two nights in Chalet 4 and we were the only guests in the lodge the entire time! Beside the amazing chalets, there were two water ponds inside the lodge garden attracting numerous birds. Mammals were also roaming freely within the lodge: we saw a **grey mongoose**, numerous **blackbucks** and **nilgais**, and even a **jungle cat** near our chalet (very brief observation though). If the lodge was very impressive, it was not the case for the park itself. Indeed, I've never seen a national park so poorly managed. The opening and closing hours made no sense: opening is at 7am, one hour after sunrise, and rangers were not even at the ticket office when we arrived on time at the gate ☹️. In the afternoon, we had to leave the park at 6:30pm, way before sunset... With such opening hours, we of course missed the best time of the day for mammal watching and the game drives were barely lasting 2 hours. The combination of such a short safari duration with a camera fee of 1520 INR per day really gave the impression that visiting Velavadar was a rip off. Like for the other parks, you need to have a driver and a ranger. The driver was from the lodge and he was excellent, knowing the park very well and where to look for animals. The ranger on the other hand was pretty much useless... We booked 3 safaris there, which was enough since the park is small. We saw of course hundreds of **blackbucks**, several **nilgais** and plenty of **wild boars**. For the iconic species, we saw quite well a **grey Indian wolf** near a carcass for quite a long time. We saw only one **jungle cat** but very nicely. We saw a **striped hyena** on a morning but entering the park so late, he was already very far away from its den and we could only get scope views. And that's it... we did not see another hyena during our 3 short safaris. This species was high in our target list and reading so many reports describing how easy and well they could see striped hyenas in Velavadar, such a poor observation was really a major disappointment. I'm glad we could see a striped hyena very well last year in Tsavo East. Velavadar is a fairly nice park but its management being so poor didn't leave a memorable souvenir...

Our last stop in Gujarat was **Little Rann of Kutch** with the target to see Asiatic wild ass and foxes (both red desert fox and Bengal fox) and hopefully wild cat. We stayed at the Rann Riders lodge, a nice place with basic but clean and comfortable chalets of local architectural design amidst tall trees and near a water pond, which was great to get some shade and cool air during the hot hours of the day between the morning and afternoon safaris. The restaurant was great and the owners extremely friendly. I liked this place. We visited the area with a driver and car from the lodge. The places visited were quite far away from the lodge but the good thing is we didn't have to take a ranger nor go through gates during specific hours, which allowed us to look for animals till dark. However, once again, we had to pay camera fees and once again they were absurd: 1200 INR per camera per day during weekdays and 1750INR during weekends!! No comment but then we got lost as the day after we paid the fees we were reimbursed for some part without really understanding the reason why... Little Rann of Kutch is a strange place: very flat, dry and desolated. As planned, we saw many **wild asses** but never in large groups. We had a splendid observation of a **red desert fox** with her 3 cubs near a den for long minutes. Unfortunately, we could not see a single **Bengal fox** during all the time we spent there. We saw very briefly a **striped hyena** running into the bush but here also, the observation was too short to allow us to take some pics. We booked 4 safaris in Little Rann of Kutch but it was too much according to me. We actually didn't much there and missed **chinkara**, **small Indian mongoose**, **Asiatic wild cat** (although I had little hopes for this species to be honest) and **Bengal fox**, which was another disappointment. On the other hand, we saw many birds in the several lakes existing in the area and I can understand why this place is packed with birders during the good migration season. For mammals however, I think that one day is enough if I would visit this place again.

After Little Rann of Kutch, we drove back to the Ahmedabad airport, said goodbye to our guide and driver, and took our domestic flights that went smoothly to Nagpur through Mumbai with Air India.

After landing in Nagpur, a taxi was waiting for us to drive us to **Tadoba National Park** and the Irai Safari Retreat where we stayed for the week. This lodge is conveniently located close to the Moharli Gate and has comfortable and clean chalet or tents, but a bit outdated. A big plus for this lodge was their beautiful swimming pool: how good it was to take a bath in the evening after the long hot days. Indeed, like in Gujarat, it was unbelievably hot in Tadoba ☹️ There were different kinds of trees in the garden of the lodge as well as a lovely water pond attracting many different bird species, which was good to spend time birding while waiting between the morning and afternoon safaris. Last but not least, all the people in this lodge were very friendly and the guy who was running the lodge was also the naturalist guide who came with us for all the safaris we booked in Tadoba. He was passionate about wildlife, very knowledgeable about where to go and wait in the park to see tigers and other nice mammals and how to place the car to get best views. We really enjoyed his service.

Now let's talk about the park. What a great park Tadoba is!: very scenic, full of animals in both the core and buffer zones and with a good road network through all the zones we could visit. This park is also very well managed: the cars/drivers and park rangers are assigned efficiently and we never waited long at the gate. In addition, the camera fees were finally decent: 250 INR per camera and per safari this time. Here also there is no difference whether you have a large or small camera but at least the price made more

sense than what we had to pay in Gujarat. The other good thing in Tadoba is that once you enter the park you can drive wherever you want within the park. The opening and closing times were also making sense: from sunrise (6am) to dawn (around 7pm) and the game drive duration was around 4 hours. Last good thing is that plastic bottles and cell phones to avoid selfies were strictly forbidden and enforced. So glad to see a park with nice rules!! There were many tourists visiting Tadoba and we saw there our first groups of western foreigners but way less than pre-covid times according to our guide.

We did 10 game drives in Tadoba and we enjoyed every one of them with great sightings of both mammals and birds. The expertise of our guide and the quality of the driver/ranger he often choosed to be with were part of the success I think. The driver quickly understood that we weren't only interested to drive fast from one place to another where tigers were spotted and drove at a decent pace, which allowed us to track and find other mammals, even the small ones. The ranger also helped us to find **Indian tree shrew**. Finally, our guide was very good at understanding tigers' behavior and put the car at the right place when tigers were crossing roads or roaming through the jungle. As a consequence, we almost saw everything in our target list ☺ Ungulates were plentiful: **chital** and **sambar** everywhere, **wild boars** and **gaurs**, including some impressively large males. I'm was surprised on the other hand to see very few **nilgai**. We saw several **mongooses**, both ruddy and grey ones but the latter kept on moving and I could not manage to get a decent shot of **Indian grey mongoose** during the entire trip! We saw **Indian tree shrew** three times including one very nice and prolonged view. We were happy to see **sloth bears** 6 times, including one foraging the ground for a long time, another one rubbing his back on a dead tree right next to the road, one climbing in a tree to heat some honey some a bee nest and even one near the village when we came back to our lodge in the evening. We saw **leopards** twice: one very well camouflaged in the jungle but another one resting right next to the road and giving us very nice photo opportunities when he decided to stand up and cross the road in front of our car. We even missed Blacky by a few minutes, a melanistic leopard very well known in Tadoba. We saw **jungle cats** twice but quite in a distance. We were spoiled with **dholes** as we saw them multiple times and in very good conditions: a pack of 7 individuals, including once on a kill, and another impressive pack of 22 individuals with many cubs! Of course, the stars of Tadoba were the **Bengal tigers** and we could see 15 different individuals. Visiting Tadoba during the hot season helped a lot for cool observations as tigers like water and often take a bath during the hot days. So if you park nearby a river, a lake or a water pond and you wait long enough you are almost guaranteed to see one. The tiger sightings were as good in the buffer zones as in the core zone. I don't pay attention and thus remember the name of the tigers we saw but there were big males, females and several cubs. We saw three grown cubs alone and waiting for their mother in the buffer zone and another time, we were lucky to see a female tiger crossing the road just in front of our car with three young cubs. The art of being at the right place at the right moment, thanks to our guide ☺ ! We saw a couple of tigers frolicking in the water and we even saw once an aborted hunt of wild boars while waiting near a water pond. Marvelous! Having said that, not everything was perfect and we missed **chousingha** ☹. I also thought we would have seen **rhesus macaques** but we saw none. In conclusion, we loved Tadoba every minute we stayed there and we wished we could spend more time there as we could not visit every section of this large and beautiful place. Clearly a park to recommend in India.

After 5 days/nights spent in Tadoba, a taxi took us back to the Nagpur airport for our trip back to France and the nightmare began... The first flight with Air India got canceled and then we missed our connecting flights to Europe. The poor service of Air India combined with connections missed for each of the following flights made us arrive at home more than 30 hours later than initially planned and we even had to buy some new tickets that I'm trying to get reimbursed but that's another story. Surprisingly our luggage followed us safely ☺ To summarize, the money lost because of the covid cancellation combined with the extra plane tickets we had to buy to go back home made this trip one of the most expensive one we've ever paid for 15 days but at least we saw, and very well, our main targets for this trip in India, that is to say: Bengal tigers, Asiatic lions, jungle cats and green bee-eaters.

All in all, this was a fairly good trip and we don't regret it but like for our previous visits in India, we always go back home with mixed feelings: this country definitely has beautiful wild places with impressive mega fauna, people are usually very friendly but the Indian government rules and officials are irritating and I have not seen any progress over the last ten years but to me, India remains one of the dirtiest, if not the dirtiest country in the world...

Mammals with photos or well seen (lifers in green)				
Species	Espèces	Latin Name	Where seen	Pic
Common pipistrelle	Pipistrelle commune	Pipistrellus pipistrellus	Observed at night in our lodges in Gir Forest and Tadoba	
Southern plains langur	Langur sacré	Semnopithecus dussumieri	Common in both Gir Forest and Tadoba	X
Golden jackal	Chacal doré	Canis aureus	An unexpected but very nice observation of 2 guys crossing a track next to our car in Gir Forest	X

Indian wolf	Loup des Indes	Canis lupus pallipes	One seen quite well in Velavadar with wild boars near a carcass	X
Red (desert) fox	Renard roux	Vulpes vulpes	Lovely observation of a female with her 3 cubs near their den in Little Rann of Kutch	X
Dhole	Dhole	Cuon alpinus	Very nice observations, including a kill!, of two packs: a pack of 7 and another massive pack of 22 individuals!	X
Sloth bear	Ours lippu	Melursus ursinus	Observed 6 different individuals, including one climbing in a tree to eat honey from a bee nest and another one next to the village near the park late evening	X
Striped hyena	Hyène rayée	Hyaena hyaena	Observed in Velavadar once but scope view only and another time in Little Rann of Kutch running away into the bush. Poor observations and disappointing for photography...	
Ruddy mongoose	Mangouste roussâtre	Herpestes smithii	Observed well once in Gir forest and another time in Tadoba	X
Indian grey mongoose	Mangouste indienne grise	Herpestes edwardsii	Observed several times along the road, in Gir Forest, in Blackbuck lodge and in Tadoba but never managed to get decent picture. Damned!	X
Asiatic lion	Lion d'Asie	Panthera leo persica	Several observed in Gir forest: 1 lone female, 2 separate males and a large group of females with many cubs	X
Jungle cat	Chat des marais	Felis chaus	Observed 3 times only. One very cool observation in Velavadar; one briefly near our chalet at the Blackbuck lodge; and one seen well, but far, in Tadoba	X
Bengal tiger	Tigre du Bengale	Panthera tigris tigris	The star of the trip. We managed to see up to 15 different individuals in Tadoba, including 6 cubs. Observations ranged from brief to very nice and prolonged views. We even observed an aborted hunt of wild boars. Nice pics!	X
Leopard	Léopard	Panthera pardus	2 individuals observed in Tadoba. One seen very well on the side of a road and another one poorly being well camouflaged in the jungle	X
Asiatic wild ass	Ane sauvage d'Asie	Equus hemionus	Several seen well in Little Rann of Kutch but never in large groups	X
Wild boar	Sanglier	Sus scrofa	Commonly observed everywhere	X
Sambar	Sambar	Cervus unicolor	A few seen in Gir forest and large numbers in Tadoba	X
Indian muntjac	Cerf aboyeur	Muntiacus vaginalis	Several seen quite well in Tadoba	X
Chital	Cerf axis	Axis axis	Very common everywhere	X
Blackbuck	Antilope cervicapre	Antilope cervicapra	What a cool antelope! Nice & multiple observations in Velavadar	X
Gaur	Gaur	Bos gaurus	Pretty common in Tadoba with some males having impressive size	X
Nilgai	Antilope nilgaut	Boselaphus tragocamelus	Seen to my surprise only in few numbers in Gir forest, Tadoba and Velavadar	X
Five-striped palm squirrel	Funambule à cinq raies	Funambulus pennantii	Very common in all the parks and lodges in Gujarat but very few seen in Tadoba	X
Indian hare	Lièvre indien	Lepus nigricollis	One observed in Velavadar and several seen in Tadoba, including at our lodge at night	X
Indian treeshrew	Toupaye d'Elliot	Anathana ellioti	Observed 3 times in Tadoba including one very nice and prolonged view	X
		Total Species Recorded = 25		

I'm adding to this report a few pictures of some of the iconic species we observed during that trip or that were new to me.



Tiger



Tiger



Jungle cat



Asiatic lion



Dhole



Dhole



Sloth bear



Leopard



Indian wolf



Golden Jackal



Red desert fox



Asiatic wild ass



Chital



Sambar



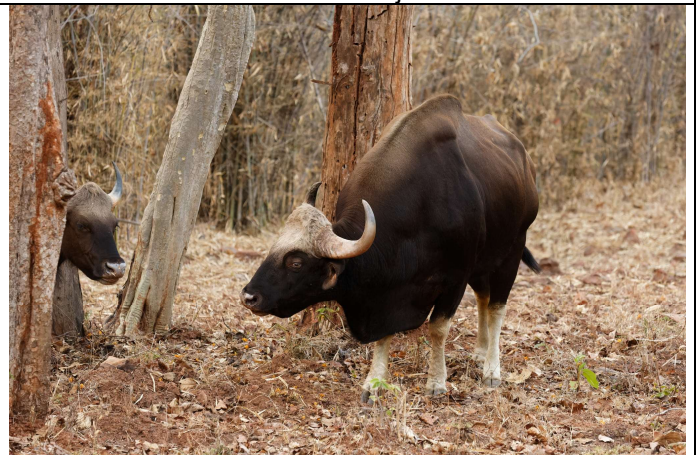
Blackbuck



Indian muntjac



Nilgai



Gaur



Ruddy mongoose



Indian hare



Langur



Five-striped palm squirrel



Indian grey mongoose



Indian tree shrew



...and again Tiger